

מערת המכפלה או מערת שדה המכפלה ?

אבנר רמו



Woodcut by Paul Gustave Louis Christophe Doré (1832-1883) depicting the burial of Sarah in the cave of the Machpelah

In the Book of Genesis we read about **מערת המכפלה** - “**the cave of the Machpelah**”, which Abraham intended to purchase for burying his dead wife - Sarah (Gen 23:9; see also: Gen 25:9). The Greeks believed that these words mean: “the double cave.” We read that this cave was “**at the edge of a field**” that belonged to: **עפרון בן-צחר** - “**Ephron the son of Zohar**”, and which was **על-פני ממרא** - “**opposite to Mamre**” (Gen 23: 8-9, 19; 25:9). We are told that Abraham ended up buying not merely the cave but the whole field of Ephron, including its trees (Gen 23:17).

However, many of the verses that convey to us this information, have superfluous words, missing words, and word disorders.

For example, we read:

ויקם אברהם וישתחו לעם-הארץ, לבני-חת.
וידבר אתם לאמר: אם-יש את-נפשכם, לקבר את-מתי מלפני-שמעוני ופגעו-לי בעפרון בן-צחר.

ויתן-לי את-מערת המכפלה אשר-לו, אשר בקצה שדהו: בכסף מלא יתננה לי, בתוככם-לאחזת-קבר.

“And Abraham rose up, and bowed down to the people of the land, to the children of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying: If it agreeable to you [that I should] bury my dead that is in front of me, hear me, and entreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar; That he may give me the cave of the Machpelah, which he has, which is in the end of his field; for the full price he will give it to me in the midst of you for a possession of a burying-place” (Gen 23:7-9).

However, the logic of these verses suggests that here לקבר is a word deletion error of: לתת לי לקבר - “to permit me to bury.” In addition, the other marked words appear superfluous.

We read in the same chapter:

ויקם השדה והמערה אשר-בו לאברהם-לאחזת-קבר: מאת בני-חתי.
“And the field, and the cave that is therein, became to Abraham for a possession of a burying-place by the children of Heth” (Gen 23:20).

However, the logic of this verse suggests that its last part is superfluous.

Yet three verses earlier we find:

ויקם שדה עפרון אשר במכפלה, אשר לפני ממרא: השדה והמערה אשר-בו וכל-העץ אשר בשדה אשר בכל-גבלו סביב.
לאברהם למקנה

“And the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that [were] in all the border thereof round about, were made sure, to Abraham for a possession” (Gen 23:17-18).

The logic of this verse and the comparison between these verses suggest that here the first words: ויקם שדה עפרון אשר במכפלה, אשר לפני ממרא is a letter and word deletion, a word insertion, and word order error of: ויקם שדה עפרון, אשר על פני ממרא לאברהם למקנה - “and Ephron’s field that is opposite to Mamre became a possession for Abraham.” In addition, the last word of the Hebrew version of verse Gen 23:17, appears superfluous.

Two chapters latter we find:

ויקברו אתו יצחק וישמעאל בניו אל-מערת המכפלה: אל-שדה עפרון בן-צחר החתי אשר על-פני ממרא.

“And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of the Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is opposite Mamre” (Gen 25:9).

The understanding here of the Greek (and the English) translators indicate that they believed that here the words אל-מערת המכפלה and אל-שדה are a letter-substitution error of: במערת המכפלה - “in the cave of the Machpelah” and of: בשדה - “in the field” respectively. In addition, the logic of this verse suggests that here the words עפרון בן-צחר החתי - “Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite” are superfluous.

Yet two chapters earlier we find:

ואחרי-כן קבר אברהם את-שרה אשתו, אל-מערת שדה המכפלה על-פני ממרא
“And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of the Machpelah
that is opposite to Mamre” (Gen 23:19).

Yet in the previous verses we read that: מכפלה - “Machpelah was part of the name, or of the description, of the cave and not of the field. Therefore, it is suggested that the words: אל-מערת שדה המכפלה על-פני ממרא is a letter-substitution, a letter and word deletion, and word order error of: במערת המכפלה בשדה אשר על-פני ממרא - “in the cave of the Machpelah that is in the field that is opposite to Mamre.”

We also find in the Book of Genesis the words of Jacob to his sons:

ויצו אותם ויאמר אלהם אני נאסף אל-עמי-קברו אתי אל-אבתי: אל-המערה-אשר בשדה עפרון החתי.
במערה אשר בשדה המכפלה אשר על-פני-ממרא-בארץ כנען: אשר קנה אברהם את-השדה,
מאת עפרון החתי-לאחזת-קבר.

“And he commanded them, and said to them: I am being gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field [of] Ephron the Hittite;
In the cave that is in the field of the Machpelah, which is opposite to Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought [with] the field from Ephron the Hittite for a possession of a burying-place” (Gen 49:29-30).

Yet again the logic of these verses and the understanding of the Greek (and the English) translators suggest that here:

קברו אתי אל-אבתי: אל-המערה אשר בשדה עפרון החתי. במערה אשר בשדה המכפלה is a letter substitution, erroneous word insertion, and word disorder of:
קברו אתי עם-אבתי במערת המכפלה, בשדה - “bury me with my fathers in the cave of the Machpelah, in the field (which is opposite to Mamre).”

In the Next chapter we find:

וישאו אתו בניו ארצה כנען, ויקברו אתו במערת שדה המכפלה: אשר קנה אברהם את-השדה לאחזת-קבר, מאת עפרון החתי-על-פני ממרא.

“And his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of the Machpelah, which Abraham bought [with] the field, for a possession of a burying-place, from Ephron the Hittite, opposite to Mamre” (Gen 50:13).

The comparison between these verses suggests again that this verse is corrupted by word insertions, and word disorder, and that we should read instead:

וישאו אתו בניו ארצה כנען, ויקברו אתו במערת המכפלה: בשדה על-פני ממרא, אשר קנה אברהם מאת עפרון החתי לאחזת-קבר,
“And his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the Machpelah, in the field opposite to Mamre, that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a possession of a burying-place.”